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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DUBAI 000543

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TAGS: [AORC](#) [IAEA](#) [KNNP](#) [EU](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: IRANIANS CLAIM NUCLEAR CRISIS HELPS GOVERNMENT

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jason L Davis, Acting Consul General, Dubai, UAE.

REASON: 1.4 (b)

1.(C) Summary: In recent conversations, two Iranian political activists - one who has worked from inside the Iranian government and one from outside government - both maintained that the current crisis served the interests of the conservative government as an excuse to crack down internally. Both advocated a diplomatic resolution, saying anything else could turn the Iranian people against the West. The first put the onus on the U.S. to resolve the situation; the second on the Iranian government. Other Iranian interlocutors also pressed for continued public and multilateral diplomacy. End summary

Former MP Elaheh Koulaei: Work Within Current Constraints

2.(S) A prominent reformist member of the previous Majles, Elaheh Koulaei (please protect) told PolEconChief February 4 (prior to that day's passage of an IAEA Board of Governors resolution to refer Iran to the UN Security Council) that the current state of crisis over the nuclear issue benefits the Iranian regime. (Her views on the reform movement in Iran are reported septel.) Currently a senior member of Iran's largest reform party (Islamic Iran Participation Front or Mosharekat Party) and professor at Tehran University, Koulaei believes it is likely the regime is deliberately trying to stoke the fires in order to have an excuse to crack down on the internal opposition. Her advice to the U.S. was confidence-building in both the public and governmental spheres and said that changing attitudes in Iran about U.S. intentions was key.

Changing the Iranian Public Mindset

3.(S) Koulaei said the Iranian government has been successful in convincing the Iranian people that the U.S. opposes any aspect of nuclear energy or technology for Iran and that the U.S. only seeks to advance its own interests in the region. She maintained that the Iranian people are skeptical of U.S. and European intentions regarding Iran, given recent events in the region. She cited as an example a comparison of U.S. rhetoric regarding elections in Iran and Azerbaijan, which she maintained were similar in lack of transparency. In the case of Iran, the U.S. urged people not to vote. In the case of Azerbaijan, she maintained, the U.S. remained silent. This, she said, was viewed by Iranians as proof that U.S. interests, not democracy, were the U.S.'s principal driving force, and that in fact, the

Iranian people did not have the support of the U.S. in their fight against their despotic regime. Regarding the UK, she said the visit of Prince Charles at the time of the most recent parliamentary elections, after the Guardians Council excluded the candidacies of many standing members of parliament - herself included, was also seen by the people as an indicator that the UK stood with the Iranian government.

4.(S) To counter Iranian government propaganda, she advised that the USG send a clear message to the Iranian people of its views on whether Iran should have any access at all to nuclear energy - separate from the issue of uranium enrichment. (Note: she acknowledged the difficulty of reaching the Iranian public and bypassing state media and said VOA and Radio Farda's websites had been blocked for quite a while, as had the BBC's Persian site.)

5.(S) Koulaei said she believed that expatriate Iranian groups are giving the U.S. government an inaccurate view of the internal situation in Iran and feared the consequences of this. In her view, radicalization of the current situation would be very dangerous. She believed that too much pressure, such as international economic sanctions on Iran, would only drive the Iranian people closer to their government.

Changing the Iranian Government Mindset

6.(S) Koulaei called on the U.S. government to work to change attitudes inside the Iranian government, in order to build confidence in U.S. intentions. She advocated sending a U.S. envoy to Tehran for dialogue, although she acknowledged that this was unlikely to be accepted from either side. She also thought the U.S. could play the role that Russia was offering, i.e. involvement in joint nuclear-related projects. She also suggested holding conferences in third countries to which conservative members of parliament could be invited to help change their attitudes on the nuclear issue.

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Student Activist Ali Afshari: Change the System

7.(S) Student activist, longtime political prisoner, and political outsider Ali Afshari (please protect) told PolEconChief mid-December that the opposition in Iran supports Iran's right to a nuclear program but objects to their government's prioritization of the issue. Many other issues were more important. He claims that many in Iran are unsure whether or not they want a nuclear bomb, but he believes some conservatives think the broader Islamic world -- beyond Pakistan -- needs nuclear weapons.

8.(S) Afshari outlined for PolEconChief, the "next steps" he believes Iran must take, starting with a suspension of enrichment until Iran can obtain the trust of the international community. Afshari advocates a popular referendum to decide the form of the Iranian government, a step he predicts the government would only accept under pressure from large-scale civil disobedience. When asked whether there was any inclination among the public to engage in civil disobedience, he pointed to recent labor unrest as evidence of receptivity. Afshari believes that once Iran became democratic, its nuclear program would not pose any danger to the international community.

9.(S) At the same time, Afshari cautioned, the opposition inside Iran opposes war to stop the nuclear program. Iran poses a very different situation than Iraq or Afghanistan, and change must come from within Iran. Afshari maintained that President Ahmadinejad actually wants to provoke a limited war, such as strikes against Iran's nuclear infrastructure. The regime would capitalize on such an event to destroy the opposition, just as the new revolutionary government did after the Iraq invasion in 1980.

10.(S) He also advised against any effort by the West to keep Iran out of the World Cup over the nuclear issue. Given the huge popularity of the sport, such a move would go a long way in turning Iranians against the West.

Other Views from Iran

11.(S) The view expressed by both Koulaei and Afshari -- that Ahmadinejad wants to provoke a "controllable" crisis -- has been echoed by numerous Iranian contacts. They believe that the government is trying to use this crisis as a unifying force with the Iranian public, portraying it as a Western attempt to dominate Iran. In addition to being an excuse to squelch the opposition, they believe the government is also trying to use the crisis to distract attention from Ahmadinejad's failure so far to deliver a better economic situation, as promised on the campaign trail.

12.(C) A conservative businessman from Tehran recently commented to PolEconChief that he thought the current U.S. course of action, which he described as a "calm" effort to build support among third countries for pressure against Iran, was a positive one with no downsides. He, like Koulaei, also thought that the U.S. needed to do more to counteract the Iranian government's propaganda campaign against the U.S. He said Iranians initially supported the invasion of Iraq but were disappointed in the aftermath. Particularly since the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq, he said, the Iranian government stepped up efforts to portray the U.S. as a "monster," and it blames the U.S. for everything Israel does. As a tactic, he advocated emphasizing to the Iranian people via VOA that the U.S. was responsible for removing Saddam Hussein -- the person who had inflicted so much harm on Iran.

13.(C) This contact claimed -- without citing any evidence -- that he did not believe Iran had the indigenous ability to build a bomb. Another contact said his relative, who he claimed headed Iran's nuclear program prior to the revolution, recently told him he does not believe Iranian scientists have the necessary skill level to build a bomb.

14.(C) Another contact claimed former IAEA negotiator Hossein Mousavian had predicted to him that with sufficient pressure, Iran would ultimately agree to the Russian offer of uranium enrichment in Russia. The conservative Tehran businessman cited above said he thought allowing other countries to cooperate in Iran's nuclear program was a good compromise.

15.(C) Many of these contacts advocate a tougher line with Iran

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than Koulaei laid out, saying sticks work better than carrots with Iran. That said, few of them support war as a solution. Most contacts maintain that outside military intervention would rouse Iranians' nationalism and rally them around their government.

Comment

16.(C) The majority of people we see in Dubai are relatively moderate, westernized, and affluent, which almost by definition means they are anti-Ahmadinejad. Many of them are also seeking U.S. visas, which can color what they say to a USG official. The Tehran businessman, however, was not applying for a visa and was introduced to PolEconChief as a conservative bazaari, who said he and other bazaaaris had not supported Ahmadinejad's candidacy and are unhappy with his performance in office. Many of these people have predicted that -- one way or another -- Ahmadinejad is likely to be pushed out within a few months if he does not do a better job in office; it is unclear whether that assessment is based on real knowledge or merely represents wishful thinking.

17.(C) Comment continued: In general, we do not see many people from the provinces or from lower economic classes in Dubai, although some Iranian workers in the spice souk in Dubai told PolEconOffs recently (not knowing they were talking to USG officials) that they liked Americans but not U.S. policy, and that they liked Ahmadinejad because "he is strong and will fight against corruption and the U.S. government."

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